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3 DISCUSSION: ITS PLACE IN A DEMOCRACY. 611

(Excerpts from a radio address recently delivered for the National Congress of Parents and Teachers by Mr. John W. Studebaker, United States Commissioner of Education.)

The educational frontier is adult education. I think the spearhead of the adult education movement ought to be public affairs forums. So I am urging that a number of "experiment stations" in community-wide public discussions be established. \*\*\*

I am frequently asked in connection with this proposal why I place so much emphasis upon public discussion. So I want to speak very directly upon the subject, "The Primary Role of Public Discussion in a Democracy."

Democracy has been defined as "government by discussion." In the early days of the great American experiment, the town meeting was prominent in the life of every community. In the town hall, people debated the problems of government and got at an understanding of public affairs. During the 1830's and 1840's the American Lyceum flourished, provided a medium of public discussion, and a free platform for the debate of controversial questions.

\* \* \* \*

But now that our people are congregated in great cities, riding in automobiles, being entertained by motion pictures, reading syndicated articles, and picking speeches right out of the ether, they are devoting relatively little time to public discussion. As a matter of fact, they really lack the facilities for promoting free public discussion. \*\*\*

When public discussion engaged the active interest of almost all citizens, our social and economic problems were simple. Now these problems are very complex. The need for public discussion has grown enormously, but the practice of the town meeting technique of civic education has almost disappeared. Probably not more than 1,000,000 of our 75,000,000 adults are regularly engaged in any organized process of public discussion of current social, economic and political issues. And the forums we have are largely concentrated in four States. \*\*\*

\* \* \* \*

Well-managed public discussion does for the intellectual life of the citizen what setting-up exercises do for the physical life. - The very process of group discussion develops a capacity for critical thinking, tolerance, power of analysis, and independence. It increases the individual interest in public affairs and provokes a wider reading of the daily newspapers, current magazines, and books. It develops the habit of mind which wants all sides heard before reaching conclusions.

So public discussion is much more than a means of promoting understanding of the specific problems considered. It contributes mightily to the building of an intellectual robustness which is essential to free self-government. \*\*\*



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The public forum discussion calls for the free exchange of ideas and the organized consideration of them. If anybody thinks he has the truth about public issues, let him argue for it at the bar of public opinion in the presence of those who disagree with him. Let him invite the critical analysis of his views in open public discussion.

\* \* \* \*

If the majority will come to his conclusions as a result, he has a substantial support for his ideas. He need not worry that some half-baked theorist will come along with a glittering display of pretty promises and win that support away by a superficial appeal. A people trained and practiced in the art of public discussion are not easily swept off their feet by the fads and fancies of the moment. A government built upon a truly critical public opinion is founded upon a rock. \*\*\*

I see it as equal in importance with the feeding of the hungry and the housing of the homeless that we develop means for public discussion and thus learn "to depend upon the counsel of all." For what shall it profit America if we merely solve today's problems with tomorrow's money, but fail to gain capacity to create and manage a permanent and diffused prosperity as freedom in a great democracy?







